



WASHINGTON UNITARIAN PULPIT

PEOPLE ASK ABOUT GOD

A Sermon by the Rev. A. Powell Davies, D.D.

ALL SOULS CHURCH (UNITARIAN), WASHINGTON, D. C.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 13, 1957

ACCORDING to the famous logician, William Stanley Jevons, there was once a Frenchman who, after taking a few lessons in logic, suddenly exclaimed that he had been using logic all his life without knowing it. What he had expected was that the formal study of the rules of correct reasoning would take him into an entirely different world from the one in which he did his ordinary thinking. He would come to possess, he thought, unusual skill in dealing with unaccustomed subjects. For was it not the case that philosophy ventured forth into remote territories of which the average mind had no knowledge? And was it not essential to the understanding of philosophical argument that one should first be well versed in the science and art of logic?

How great was his disappointment, therefore, when he discovered that philosophy was nothing more than ordinary thinking, rather more carefully pursued. And that logic was just the way he had always tried to reason, but now somewhat more strictly carried out. Instead of finding himself in an entirely different world, he was compelled to see that the only world there is is the one he had been living in. And instead of encountering new and unheralded intellectual experiences, he was forced to admit that he was just thinking over, in a more thoroughgoing way, experiences with which he was already familiar. Thus he came to recognize that logic was just the name that had been given to the effort he had been making all his life—an effort to observe accurately and draw correct conclusions from whatever it was he thought he saw.

It would be a wonderful thing for religion if those who approach it as though it were exclusive territory could undergo a similar experience to this Frenchman's. If they could, they would realize that religion covers the same areas of thought and experience that everything else covers. It is not something separate and apart from ordinary life. It *is* life—life of every kind, viewed from the standpoint of meaning and purpose: life lived in the fuller awareness of its human quality and spiritual significance. At any rate, it is that to begin with. Any other beginning is likely to be an unfruitful one.

This is what people should have in mind when they ask about God. Because they have been taught a wrong approach, most people, when they think about God, start off with the wrong questions. They think of God as a possible answer to a speculative question. "Is there a God?" they ask. And they bring before their minds the image of a majestic personage—or something so close to that that the distinctions are not worth bothering with. "This Being," they say to themselves, "may or may not exist. He may or may not have created the universe. He is a question mark." But all the time, they have an image in their minds which prevents them from seeing the reality at which they should be looking.

This condition is aggravated by a preoccupation with what are called external facts—or, if all the facts are gathered together and considered as a whole, with what is called external reality. But there is no such thing as an external reality, even to science, apart from the *internal* reality of the human mind that perceives it. Science has now fully recognized this by setting up so-called principles of "the scale of observation." In its simplest terms, this means that whatever is perceived as outer reality is only perceived to the extent that a given mentality, under certain given circumstances, is able to interpret it. If the mentality has been able to invent a microscope, the interpretation will be widened in the direction of the microscope. If a telescope has been invented, interpretation will be proportionate to its range. If mathematics has been developed, precision will be attainable to the extent that mathematics makes it possible . . . But all of this, no matter at what level, is conditioned by the mind that is interacting with it. And this mind—namely the human mind—is not an outer fact at all. It is not observable. It cannot be weighed or measured. It is, in its actual substance, if it *has* substance, quite elusive. Yet, in the language of science, it is the "recording-thinking instrument." It is, no matter how earnestly we try to escape the fact, the final scientific reality of all.

And this mind, as I say, has been the quite decisive factor that

the modern age, until fairly recently, has chosen to neglect. We have talked of external reality as though we knew about it without having to depend upon *internal* reality, namely, the human mind, to know anything about anything else whatever. It is with the thought of correcting this false emphasis that some of the more thoughtful scientists have been warning us in the last few decades not to suppose that science knows something that it doesn't know.

"I am not sure," Sir Arthur Eddington tells us, "that the mathematician understands this world of ours better than the poet and the mystic." And Sir James Jeans, in his *Mysterious Universe*, tells us bluntly that "science is not yet in contact with ultimate reality." In his presidential address before the British Association of Scientists (in 1934), he went on to say that "the Nature we study does not consist so much of something we perceive as of *our perceptions*; . . . there is" he concludes, "no clear-cut division between the subject and the object." And we could go on quoting from many other scientists, such as Thomson or Fleming; Milliken, Smuts or Compton; or latterly, DeNouy.

This, if we will allow it, will bring us to the right starting-point when we want to consider experience of God. For *all* facts, without exception, are facts of experience. And so-called physical facts are no more real than any others. Let us see whether it is possible to put all this very simply. At the present moment, I have experience of this church in which we are meeting. I do not doubt its tangible reality. Yet, my experience is not merely of what was written down in the architect's specifications: bricks and mortar, steel beams, joists and rafters, plaster, paint and glass. I have an experience of its beauty, of its pleasing proportions, and this experience is just as real as my experience of its size and shape and solidity. Even if the church itself were not here, or if I were distant from it, I could have a similar experience of its beauty, just by remembering or imagining it. It would be an entirely real experience, and just as real in the case of a church that had not yet been built, provided my mind were equal to the task of constructing it in imagination.

Or let me put it still another way. We will suppose that I am looking at an oil-painting. What do I experience? Pigment? Turpentine? Linseed oil, brush marks and canvas? Perhaps I do, but I scarcely notice them. Indeed, if the painting is good, I do not notice them at all. What I experience is the picture. And I may be emotionally moved by its beauty so much that I am not aware of the physical texture of the painting in the least.

"Ah," but some one says, "it is after all the pigment and canvas that you actually see." No, indeed! I see the beauty. See it with

my mind through what comes to it through my eyes. And my experience of it in my mind is not one whit more mysterious than my experience of the light-waves that carry it through my optical nerves to my brain. Color itself is in the end mental. It is something that happens in the mind when light-waves of a certain length and frequency reach the brain. There are thousands of other light-waves that never reach the brain at all, or if they do, the mind is not able to do anything with them. Light is not in the least more substantial or real or less mysterious than the sense of beauty.

What we must do, therefore, is to accept *all* that comes to us in experience—not merely the things we call physical—for we do not know at last what physical means any more than we know what spiritual means. If we do this, we shall have to accept the reality, not only of beauty but of conscience, of the claim of justice, of the power of truth, and of everything we call spiritual. After we have accepted them, we may want to examine them rather carefully to be sure how much importance should be attached to such qualities, and in what ways, but we must certainly begin by accepting them as real. For they *are* real.

Now, I have stressed all this because, as I said at the beginning, people go astray in their search for God because they do not take the right starting-point. We should never begin by asking, "Is there a God?"—as though God could be something outside of ordinary experience; or, to put it in the old-fashioned way, something outside of Nature. If that is the question people insist upon asking, there can be only one answer. Nobody knows. For how can we know what lies outside our experience? And how can we imagine anything that is not known to us in the natural world? One may just as well ask an astronomer whether there are any stars outside the universe. He will answer that so far as he knows, *nothing* can be outside the universe. It is an empty question. And it is just as empty to ask whether there is a God outside of the world of life. The world of life is the only world we know and all our experience lies within it.

What we must ask then, is not whether there is *a* God, as though God could be something outside everything else, but what it is of which we have experience when we feel the power of truth, or the claim of justice, or the sense of beauty. It is certainly not the molecules of stone in a range of mountains that move our hearts with a feeling of wonder. And it is certainly nothing physical that makes us know that truth is important. Or that right is better than wrong.

We do have experience of *something*, whatever it is, that we have to call spiritual or else give it no name at all. And this something is just as real as the earth beneath our feet or the sky above us. If we believe in the reality of earth and sky, how can we avoid believing in the reality of this other something—because of which we can see the earth as beautiful and marvel at the starry vastness of the sky?

This other something is no more produced by man than the earth is. He *discovers* it in his experience—exactly as he discovers the ground beneath his feet. And just as he can stumble over a rock if he is careless where he walks, so he can be tripped up by transgressions against the truth; yes, and in the same way that a physical substance can poison his body, so can a corrupt way of thinking drug his mind.

There is no getting away from it; the spiritual is completely real. We never experience *all* of it at one time; no, but we never experience the entire physical universe either. Yet we *speak* of a physical universe. Because we experience parts of it, we believe that other parts can also be experienced. With better telescopes, better microscopes and improved logic and mathematics, we can know, we say, a great deal more about the universe. Yes, but what is there about this that is essentially different from our situation with the spiritual? With better understanding, profounder wisdom, deeper insights, and above all, nobler living, we can hope to know a great deal more about the spiritual, too. And we can believe that though we only experience it in part, it exists as a whole. It is the same kind of belief as that we have about the physical universe.

But there is something further. The spiritual reality is alive. Whatever the mystery of aliveness may be, it is no more mysterious when we think of it as a whole than when we think of it in an individual living being. Truth lives in minds that are formed by it—or broken by betrayal of it. Beauty lives in hearts that respond to it. Justice is alive in generation after generation. The spiritual is a *living* reality!

And so we come to this: if the spiritual is real, and if we think of it as a *total* reality that includes all the spiritual qualities derived from it, just as the universe is a total reality, derived from whatever force it is that has produced it; and if we also see that this total spiritual reality is *alive*, what name shall we give it?

I confess that it seems to me most natural that we should call it God. Whatever there may be of God that is more than this—and I am not supposing for a moment that this of which we have experience is all of God that there is—this is God as we can know God.

This is the God without whom—or which—the scientist would never have within his mind the power to search for truth, or the compulsion to be loyal to it. It is the God—the living spiritual reality—without whom the poet would never learn to write a single verse or hear the music of the words he utters. It is the God from whom even the atheist cannot escape. But it is also the God of all of us—of everyone whatever.

I do not say that everyone *recognizes* this God. No, but we lived in the universe, too, for a long time before we called it that. Men breathed the air about them for millions of years before they knew that it was air. Yet, they knew their need of it. It was once indeed a great mystery. So great a mystery that in later ages men remembered it when they wanted to express the further mystery of God. The Greek word for spirit is the same word as the one for breath: *pneuma*. It means air, and also spirit: that which is breathed. And when we are told in the New Testament that God is spirit (*pneuma*) although the writer has an elaborate theology in mind, his basic intention is that we shall understand it in just the sense the word indicates. God is what the soul ‘breathes’ as the body breathes air. And this remains the case whether we acknowledge it or not.

There is nothing remarkable in our not having been aware of what sustains our life. Think of the thousands of years that people lived in Western Europe without ever knowing that the temperate climate they enjoyed was due to the Gulf Stream flowing from a distant ocean. Or think how long it is before an infant knows that what comes to him as experience of care and nurture is his mother.

Moreover, are we to suppose that the human mind already knows all there is to know about the spiritual?—that there is no further comprehension to be reached in the future? Are we to think even in the present that because some men do not *consciously* experience God, they have no experience of God at all? It seems to me that if we will take the right starting-point, the same sort of starting-point that science takes for exploring the physical universe, the starting-point we have been trying to take this morning, we are bound to come to a recognition that God is as real as the air we breathe—and that, at least to this extent, he is known to us in experience.

Do you remember those striking words of Maeterlinck's? “We wander in God like helpless sleep-walkers.” How true it is—how pitifully true! Like sleep-walkers! Spiritually blind with our eyes wide open! Drifting and wandering! When we might move with

purpose and aim. And helpless! When we might have the strength of the fully-grown soul. But our wandering is *in God*. That at least we cannot lose. We wander—but in God.

I wonder what would happen to us—and to the world—if we should awake? Perhaps God would become as real to us as he was to Jeremiah or Jesus. As real and as unmistakable. And this, no doubt, is what we fear. For what might not the result be—in the claims upon us? In our way of life? If we altogether knew—and consciously—the God that we only know with incomplete awareness?

But perhaps we should ask in closing a further question: Is this the God that religion has tried to identify? Not always. Religion, too, has often lost its way. But it *is* the God religion at its best has tried to identify. It is told in the Old Testament, for instance, that Moses once asked God his name. The story is legendary but it conveys a profound insight. For the answer of God to Moses is, "I am that I am"; or "I am that which is." (In Hebrew this probably translates an Egyptian liturgical expression: one with immense possibilities for exposition.) The meaning is "I am Reality, the Aliveness of Reality, the Breath of the Life of the World." And in the New Testament, as we have already seen, God is identified as *spirit*—which once again means Aliveness, Breath, the life that is 'breathed' by the Soul.

It is a pity that the simplicity and purity of these definitions is ever departed from. It is a pity that creeds that say more than this are ever written. For in reality they do not say more, they say less. Beyond this, there is room only for symbolism and poetry—the poetry that can tell our hearts what prose can never convey—bringing us the glow of a truth that is living, the fire of moral passion, the sweet wonder of all loveliness—all that is splendid and high with hope, all that is struggling and watered with tears, all that man at his best can become, all that man at his worst repents, all that is found and lost and sought and found again, as we travel the paths of human pilgrimage.

All this, yes, and all that begins with this and then goes out beyond the far horizons: this it is that is full of the power and the glory, the joy and the beauty, the strength and the wonder of God.

Prayer: *O Thou whom we fear we know not, and yet without whom we could know nought else, teach us how truly we know thee when the true, the good and the beautiful are knocking on the doors of our hearts. Amen.*

Printed for
THE PUBLICATIONS COMMITTEE
All Souls Church (Unitarian)
Sixteenth and Harvard Streets N.W.
Washington 9, D. C.
Miss Vesta Magnusson, *Chairman*

Additional copies of this and other sermons by Dr. Davies may be secured upon application at ten cents per copy. Annual subscription to eight or more booklet sermons, one dollar postpaid.

SUBSCRIPTION SERIES

1956 - 1957

Do Too Many People Go To Church?
The Real Enemies of the Public Schools
The Morality of Peace
The Doubt and the Promise
People Ask About God

Some Thoughts About Joe Smith
(mimeographed—10c)

The Rights of Atheists—10c